

Protecting Welsh Place-names – a live debate!

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Introduction - Place-names are stepping-stones to our past, connecting us to our ancestors. Once severed, geographical, social and cultural links between places and names cannot be restored. This paper discusses the importance of toponyms to our understanding of the landscape and illustrates the rich seam of historic and cultural information encapsulated in toponyms. Often overlooked, minor place-names conceal and reveal reasons for their initial, deliberate adoption and tell us about the characteristics of a specific place. Also discussed are some of the challenges of nurturing and preserving this living archive.

Toponyms unlock history and culture in the landscape - Research, conducted in Snowdonia National Park in the medieval commote of Ardudwy, reveals a palimpsest of Welsh toponyms in a rural landscape.

Toponyms recorded in 13th century court records, land leases, Crown documents and the later Tithe Apportionment of 1840 were placed, chronologically in a database. A few names were traced back to 1209, many to the 14th century and most to 1536 when lands could be sold and when personal name toponyms were replaced by geographical, descriptive names. Some names reflected historical events including the traumatic conquest of

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Wales by Edward 1 which was, manifested in Ardudwy with a castle and borough at Harlech.

Ecclesiastical parishes were established in the 12th century. Their boundaries were of paramount importance as the name, *Cefn-faes* (ridge or end + open field), indicates. This is always located on a parish boundary or sub-division, though its significance is lost. Boundaries are important, not because they separate but because they indicate differences.

When annotated onto the Tithe maps, the toponyms *erw* and *acre*, both related to medieval agrarian practices, revealed kindred free lands and bond settlements. For example, the former bond lands belonging to the Welsh princes were subsumed at Harlech. Re-measured in *acres* they sustained the borough and were, over time, named and leased to local free families, before melting away into their burgeoning estates. These fields now carry the element *acre* in their names. Lands which were free before 1536, mostly with their borders intact, indicate a medieval pattern of agriculture and evidence of transhumance.

A new methodology emerged which is transferrable to other areas of Wales. One successful demonstration of this was a series of twelve television documentary programmes.

A sense of place - One of the most striking differences between first language speakers of Welsh and the English is to be found in the first contact with a stranger. The English will ask 'What do you do?' Welsh speakers always enquire '*o ble ydych chi'n dod?*' ('Where are you from?'). The name of a place links with our past and is deep within our psyche. We may have all but lost our connection to the soil, but place-names contribute to our sense of belonging to a particular place, whether local or national.

Toponyms and change - The Ardudwy coast faces west. Arable lands are mainly limited to the coastal strip and river valleys. Because of its location, Ardudwy has largely retained its traditional elements of social conservatism, legal restrictions on selling land until 1536, economic poverty and poor communications. Change to toponyms was gradual and dynamic, and remained largely unchanged until the 20th century.

Today, this is changing rapidly with increased numbers of incomers settling and looking for a better lifestyle, often not embracing the social or cultural economy. The Covid pandemic has speeded up the process. Some have grasped opportunities to participate in talks and workshops but attempts to engage with others have been challenging. Historic farm names are changed to unrelated English names, often flippant and inappropriate, severing our connections with history.

Toponyms and language - Wales is officially a bilingual country of some 3 million people. Some 33% speak Welsh (Cymraeg) according to the 2011 Census. In Ardudwy, however, some 65% of residents speak Welsh. It is a tourist destination. In many tourist hotspots, especially in the mountains and on the coast, toponyms are eroding with speed. Names which are considered too difficult to pronounce are re-named on a whim, always in English and like those responsible, with no connection to the area. A hanging valley in Snowdonia, *Cwm Cneifion* (Valley + sheep fleece clippings) derives from the fact that early sheep farmers used to shear out on the mountain has been changed to the *Nameless Cwm*. A medieval unit of administration *Y Faerdref* in south west Wales is now *Happy Donkey Hill*. These mantras quickly replace the original names, often reinforced by published guidebooks and maps.

The challenges - protecting toponyms - Economic and social changes have meant losses of some toponyms as family farms change hands without natural transfer of toponyms.

The Welsh Place-Name Society (WPNS), has engaged with the general public and national organisations through two national Heritage Lottery projects. Such joint activities have made measurable changes to the perception of the organisations and communities about the importance of place-names. WPNS has also worked on joint initiatives with the Snowdonia National Park, Natural Resources Wales (to provide a digital map for recording place-names), The National Library of Wales which hosts the website and several Archaeological Trusts.

Currently, place-names have no legal protection, unlike historic monuments, castles, or animals such as bats. In 2016 the Society presented robust evidence, unsuccessfully, to the Welsh Government to protect place-names. The protection of place-names is not a linguistic or political issue, but a legal one which concerns the identity and character of a place.

There is a lively national discussion with a substantial and vocal body of public opinion which supports legal protection for place-names as undertaken successfully in other countries, notably, Canada.

Continued pressure is being put on the Welsh Government and on the organisations which are charged with the protection of heritage.

They have yet to recognise that place-names are part of that cultural heritage and urgently need legal protection.

References

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